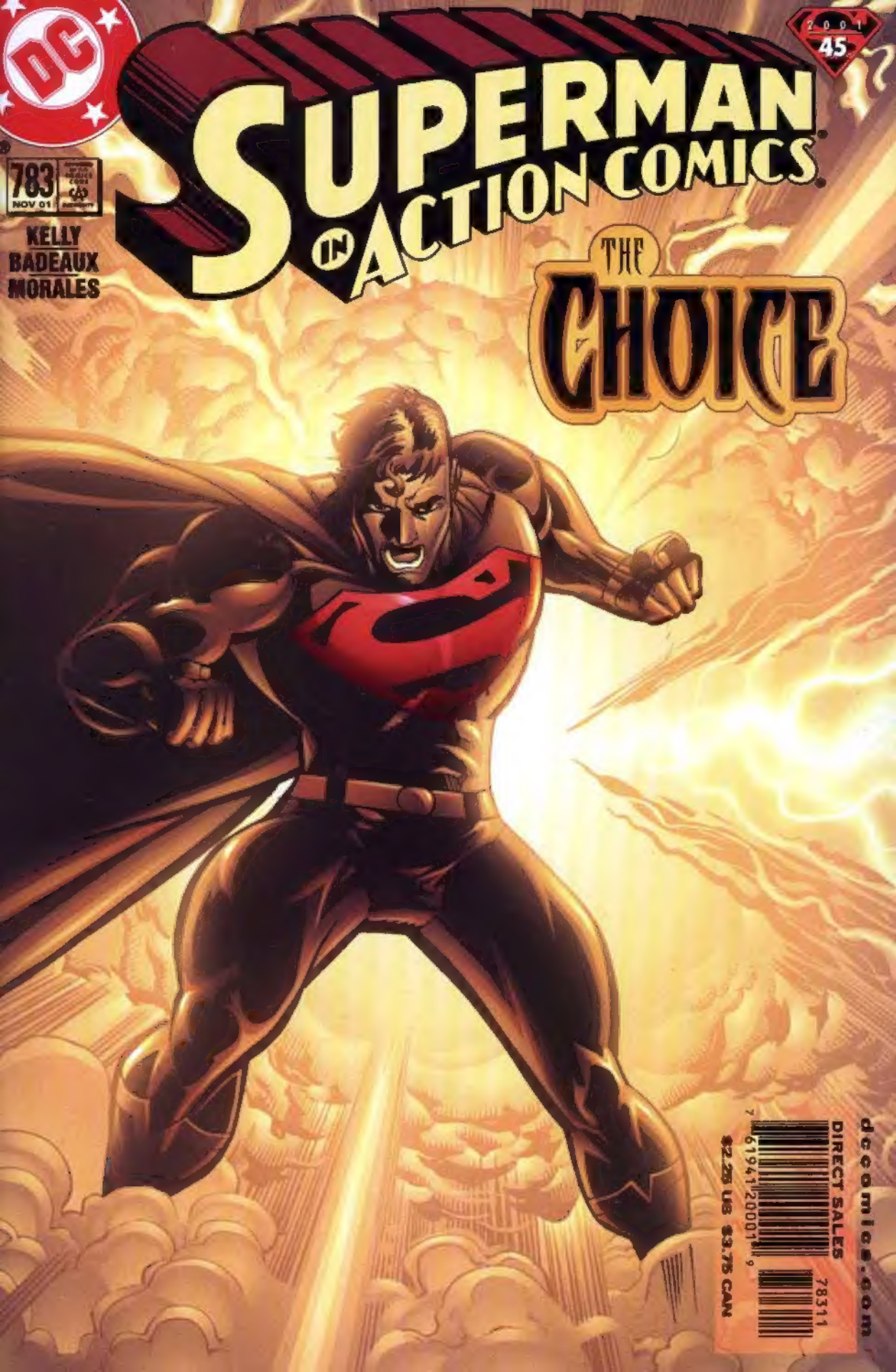
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Dark Days
by Clark Kent.
The world is dark as I write this. Not just because Metropolis power has yet to be restored. Not because night has wrapped me up in silent cool.

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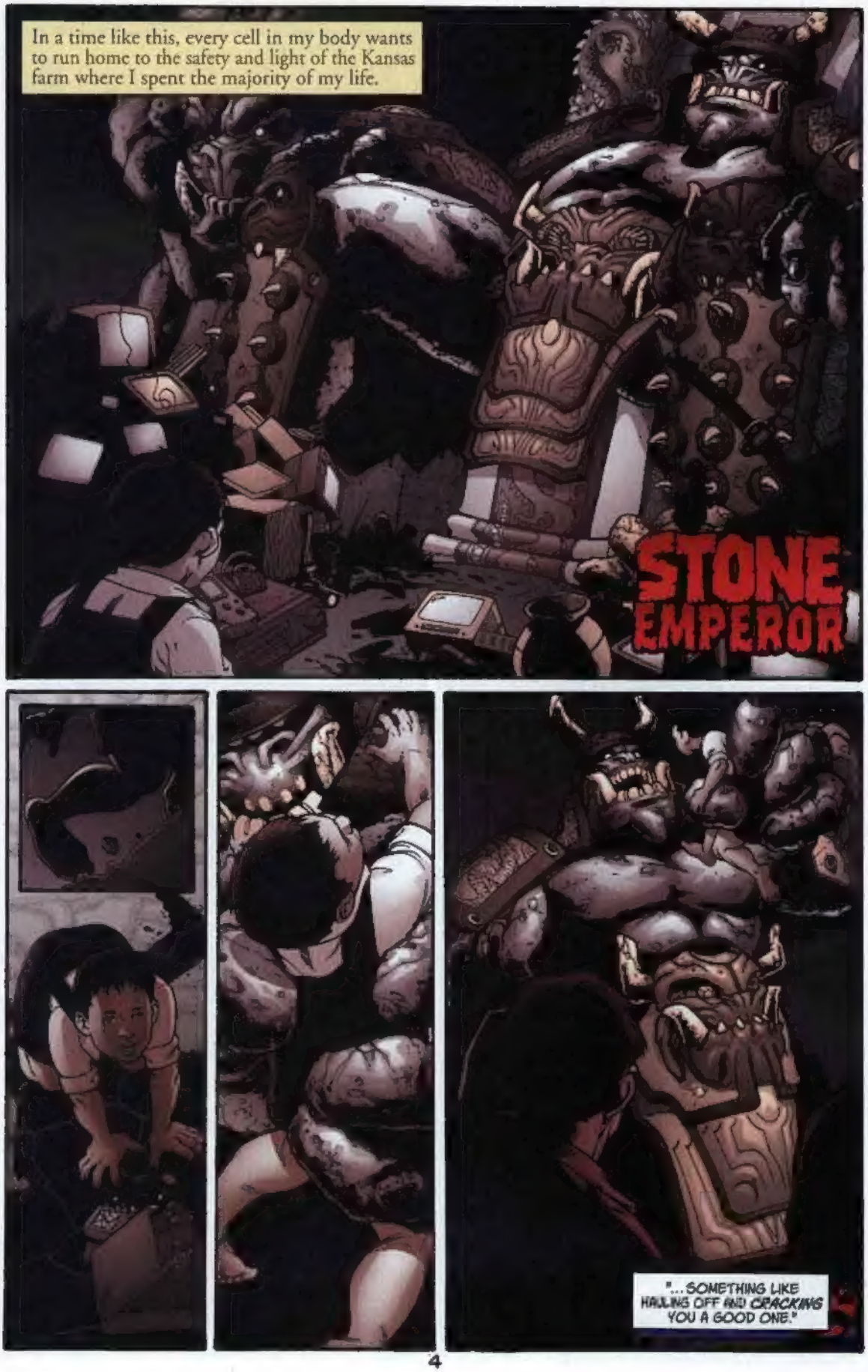
The world -- The entire world writhes under a thick fog of blackest chaos.
"BUT I'M USUALLY NOT SURE. A LOT OF THE TIME, I MANAGE TO PULL IT OFF, WHATEVER 'IT' IS..., BUT NOT ALWAYS.
Despite the fact that, together, as a planet, we survived the most dire cataclysm to face civilization in ages --
"PEOPLE SEEN TO *FORGET* THE TIMES I FAIL... I *NEVER* FORGET MY MISTAKES.

Opportunists, petty dictators, maniacs have risen like barb wire weeds on dead battlefields to pick through the ashes, crushing hope in wide bloody steps.
"WHICH IS WHY THIS IS SO... DIFFICULT. I DON'T WANT TO MAKE ANOTHER ONE TODAY. NOT TODAY."

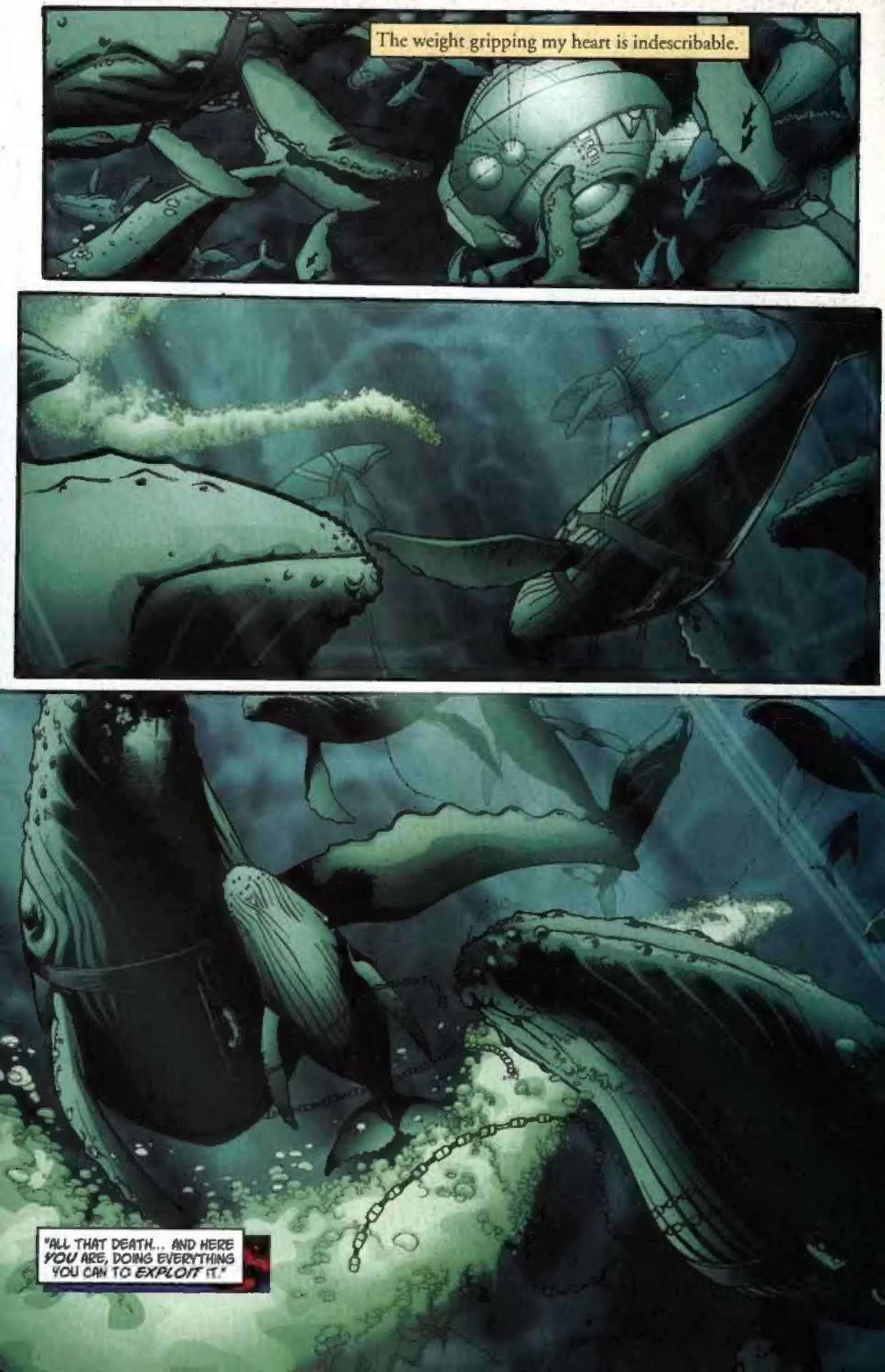
I have never been so patently disappointed with humanity as a species as I am right now. I've never felt such darkness, either outside or in my own heart.
I've never felt so helpless.
"EVERY INSTINCT I HAVE IS SCREAMING FOR ME TO DO SOMETHING ELSE... SOMETHING LOGICAL.
SOMETHING YOU DESERVE..."


In a time like this, every cell in my body wants to run home to the safety and light of the Kansas farm where I spent the majority of my life.
STONE EMPEROR
"...SOMETHING LIKE HAULING OFF AND CRACKING YOU A GOOD ONE."

It is a place of warm memory. Love. Unadulterated goodness. Built by my father with his father; their blood keeping the place vital and fortified through even the darkest storm.
It is the safest place on Earth... It was the safest place on Earth.
"I STILL *MIGHT*. I DON'T KNOW... I'M STILL WORKING IT THROUGH, SO JUST... JUST LISTEN."

My father is missing.
SCORCH
"DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE... GONE? MISSING OR... DEAD?"

Like countless others throughout the country -- Around the world, my Pa got lost somewhere in the dark when Hell fell from the sky.
He's out there right now... at the mercy of men turned demons...
"I'VE BEEN COUNTING. SOME OF THEM BY HAND, HERE ON EARTH. UP IN THE STARS. MEN AND WOMEN WHO JUST DON'T EXIST ANYMORE...
"I REACHED A BILLION THIS MORNING."


The weight gripping my heart is indescribable.
"ALL THAT DEATH... AND HERE *YOU* ARE, DOING EVERYTHING YOU CAN TO *EXPLOIT* IT."

My mother, thank God, is fine. In fact, she's turned every ounce of her attention to the local relief efforts, helping the displaced returned home.
She says it helps "pass the time."

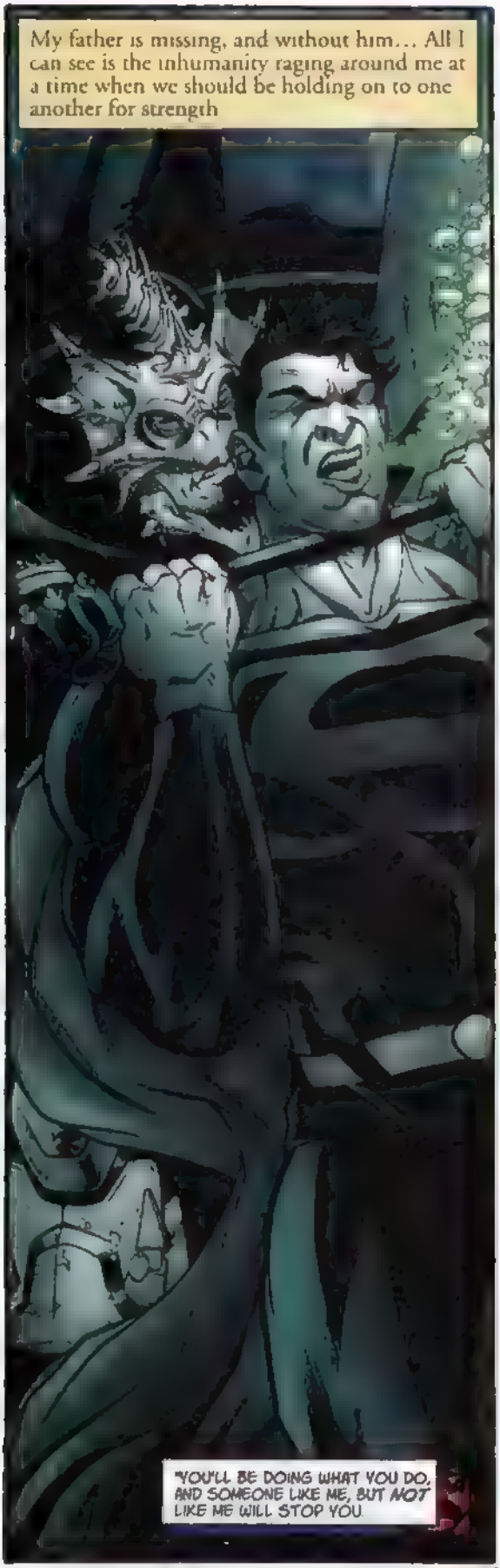
OCEAN MASTER
"YOU HAVE FAMILY SOMEWHERE... DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHETHER OR NOT THEY'RE STILL ALIVE?"

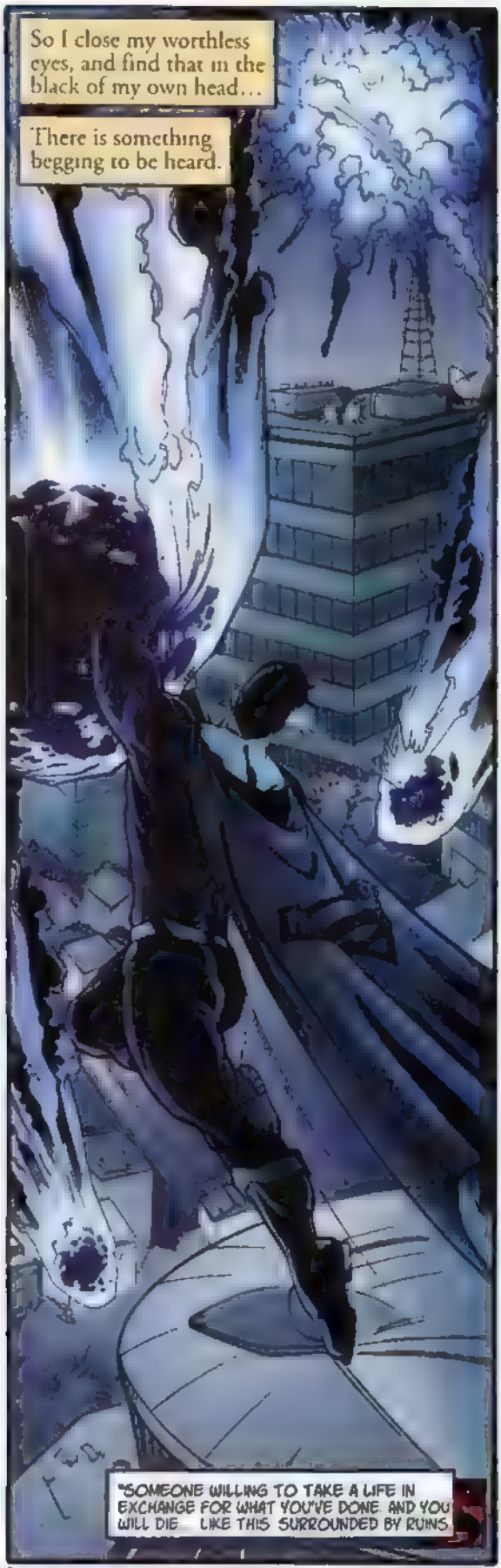
"Once, when you were little," she reminds me, "your father went missing for almost a week."
Twister. Bad one. Took the back half of Holy Cross and tossed it a hundred yards.
MAJOR DISASTER
"ARE YOU CONSIDERING ANYTHING OUTSIDE OF THIS PETTY ENDEAVOR YOU'VE STARTED? THE PAIN THE FEAR YOU'RE INFLICTING?

Turned out he managed to hole up in the basement of McCreedy's pub before the roof caved in." At this, she chuckles, polishing her glasses the way she sometimes does when she shares gossip that makes her feel guilty.
They ran out of water the third day, and someone thought rye might make for a good substitute. When they pulled him out of there, he smelled like a wino and was singing like a sailor.
"IS THIS HOW YOU WANT TO DIE?

"IS THIS HOW YOU WANT TO DIE?

She laughs. A half laugh, and looks towards the fields outside.
"He'll make do. He'll survive. He always does."
"BECAUSE YOU WILL DIE SOMEDAY
Her faith intangible, begging my eyes to follow hers. But even with my painful perfect vision, I don't see Pa.
"MAYBE TODAY. NEXT MONTH. A FEW YEARS FROM NOW, WHENEVER


My father is missing, and without him… All I can see is the inhumanity raging around me at a time when we should be holding on to one another for strength
"YOU'LL BE DOING WHAT YOU DO, AND SOMEONE LIKE ME, BUT NOT LIKE ME WILL STOP YOU.


So I close my worthless eyes, and find that in the black of my own head…
There is something begging to be heard.
"SOMEONE WILLING TO TAKE A LIFE IN EXCHANGE FOR WHAT YOU'VE DONE. AND YOU WILL DIE… LIKE THIS. SURROUNDED BY RUINS.

"Men can be stupid, careless, even downright dangerous at times…
"But overall, Mankind ain't bad by nature, Clark."
'WOULD THAT SATISFY YOU?
I'm twelve years old. It's just before sunrise on the hill where Pa and I fill the dark with words and share our thoughts in a private ritual.
BELIEVE ME, I KNOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE, AND SOME OF IT I DON'T KNOW I'D WANT TO LIVE WITH IT BUT DEATH?

I'm nursing a bruised arm and the fat lip I got for knowing the right answer to a history question Phil Tackett couldn't spit out. Football cleats behind the dumpster. It still stings.
I just told Pa I want to bring an axe handle to school and even the score because Phil Tackett is an evil, hurtful thing.
"Ain't right for anyone to lay an angry hand on you, Clark. You'd be fully in your rights to settle the score.
"I wonder, though, if there might not be a better way to teach him a lesson...
"A real lesson, that worked on his heart instead of his jaw. A way to give him a second chance."
"THAT'S IT. NO NOTHING. NO REDO.
"NO SECOND CHANCE.

"MOST EVERYONE NEEDS A SECOND CHANCE AT SOME POINT IN THE R LIVES... AND MOST OF THEM DESERVE ONE
"MY HEART IS BEATING THROUGH MY CHEST RIGHT NOW, BECAUSE THIS IS WHERE I'M SUPPOSED TO HAUL YOU IN AND LOCK YOU UP
"BUT SOMETHING HAS TO CHANGE, DOESN'T IT? IT JUST HAS TO
"DO YOU REALIZE HOW POWERFUL THOSE TWO WORDS ARE, SECOND CHANCE?
"I DON'T THINK THERE'S A GREATER GIFT YOU CAN GIVE TO SOMEONE A SECOND CHANCE IN LIFE.
"SO... I'M OFFERING YOU A SECOND CHANCE. PUT THE PAST IN A BOX AND TAKE MY HAND IN FRIENDSHIP. IT WON'T BE EASY, AND I'M NOT REMOVING WHAT [illegible] IN THE FIRST PLACE --
"BUT FRANKLY, I CAN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT ANY OF THAT. THE PAST IS HARD AND COLD AND UNFORGIVING. I CAN ONLY CHANGE THE FUTURE... AND SO CAN YOU
"YOU HAVE SUCH... POWER. GIFTS. DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU COULD ACCOMPLISH IF YOU JUST TRIED?
"YOU COULD MAKE THE WORLD BEAUTIFUL. YOU COULD CHANGE EVERYTHING.

A second chance.
Do we deserve a second chance?
"SO THAT'S THE DEAL. ONE-TIME OFFER.
"TAKE MY HAND. LET ME HELP YOU.
"LET'S MAKE A BETTER WORLD.
Or are we so lost in the dark we wouldn't see such a precious gift if it was placed in our laps?
"WHAT DO YOU SAY?"

I guess there's only one way to find out. Give the gift… And see if anyone is brave enough to accept it.

THANK YOU...
THANKS, PA.
The Gift
JOE KELLY writer
BRANDON BADEAUX penciller
MARK MORALES inker
MOOSE BAUMANN colors
COMICRAFT letters
TOM PALMER jr assistant editor
EDDIE BERGANZA editor
SUPERMAN created by: JERRY SIEGEL & JOE SHUSTER